

## Picture This by Glitter\_Bug

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Developing Relationship, Fluff, M/M, POV Outsider, Photographs, Probably period inaccurate photo developing descriptions!, cross post from tumblr

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Jonathan Byers, Steve Harrington

**Relationships:** Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2021-06-01

**Updated:** 2021-06-01

**Packaged:** 2022-03-31 15:09:17

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 2,246

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

*With every roll of film that Max brings in, Jonathan starts spotting more and more shots of Billy and Steve. He sees them laughing together in the background or sitting close beside each other right at the edge of the frame. He catches Steve's foot pressed right up against Billy's under a table, and he loses count of the times that he sees one of them gazing at the other with a look he could only describe as 'smitten'.*

A little look at Billy and Steve's relationship, as captured by Max's camera and seen by Jonathan.

## Picture This

### Author's Note:

A silly little ficlet I posted on Tumblr and decided to throw on here too! I hope you like it. I don't THINK I have any extra warnings, but lemme know if I missed anything.

Jonathan was honestly surprised that the place still existed.

The old photography studio feels like a place of days gone by, but it's still a place where generations of Hawkins' families gather for staged family photos, where Mr. Wren digs out a shabby rabbit puppet to get toddlers to give toothy smiles, while his son flirts shamelessly with the moms until he teases out the perfect, natural smile. The kind of place where you can trace whole lives on the walls lined with portraits celebrating births, graduations and retirements.

Not that Jonathan sees much of that.

Because his new job means that he's pretty much always squirreled away in the pokey little room at the back, working the printing machine and developing the rolls of film dropped off by all the residents of Hawkins who don't trust that newfangled technology at the Fotomat (which Jonathan is certain is actually pretty similar to the tech he's using) and then packaging their prints up into neat little envelopes ready to be collected.

It's easy enough work for decent enough pay. No one bothers him. The two Mr. Wrens keep to themselves and they don't mind if Jonathan listens to music while he works, as long as he gets the job done on time. Which he always does, because there's not exactly a surge of demand for his services.

Except, of course, from his friends. Or, more specifically, Will's friends. And even more specifically, Max.

Max, who'd been given a new camera for her birthday by a surprisingly generous Billy and was most certainly taking advantage of Jonathan's offer of cheap rolls of film and even cheaper processing.

But Jon didn't really mind that much.

Because Max has a knack for catching her subjects right in the middle of the action, and her photographs are filled with so much joy that Jonathan can't help but smile fondly at her pictures as they print out in front of his eyes, delighted to see so many images of Will laughing and smiling. Whenever he sees them, Jonathan feels a real rush of fondness for the whole Party, the kids who'd been through so much, who'd suffered together and struggled together and finally, *finally* come out the other side, and he finds himself gazing at some of the images for a while, relishing the pure happiness that radiates from them.

It's as he's staring at one particular image, trying to work out if the mess of hair sticking up behind a pile of D&D books belongs to Mike or Will, that he sees it.

Them.

Billy and Steve.

Sitting together on the couch at the Wheeler's house, right in the background of the shot.

He hadn't realised at first, because the picture actually cuts off most of Billy, just leaving a slice of his jeans and one denim clad arm in frame. But it's got to be him. Jon quickly checks back to confirm it, and *yep*, there's a photo of Billy from earlier in the day- one where he's peering over Will's shoulder with a look of absolute wonder on his face as he stares down at the sketchbook on Will's lap- and the double denim is there clear as day. But Jon can't quite work it all out. Because if it is him in the later picture then he's sitting pretty damn close to Steve. The arm in question is slung right over Steve's shoulder, and the slice of leg that Jon can see is pressed right against Steve's thigh. And Steve's beaming, leaning into the touch just a little. Like he wants it. Like he's seeking out more.

It's not much. But Jon files the thought away.

And he starts looking for it.

And with every roll of film that Max brings in, Jonathan starts spotting more and more shots of Billy and Steve. He sees them laughing together in the background or sitting close beside each other right at the edge of the frame. He catches Steve's foot pressed right up against Billy's under a table, and he loses count of the times

that he sees one of them gazing at the other with a look he could only describe as 'smitten'. He spots Billy in one of the earliest snaps of a set, wearing his usual denim jacket, and then he sees the exact same jacket draped around Steve's shoulders in the later shots, the ones where the kids are all standing outside watching Max teach El some skateboarding tricks.

And then he sees something else.

It's in one of the skateboarding pictures, one where whoever is holding the camera has zoomed in to capture El's delighted smile, that Jonathan spots the other detail they've unintentionally managed to catch.

Steve's pinkie finger hooked around Billy's.

Jonathan doesn't say anything. But he makes sure that that particular print doesn't make it into the brown envelope. He knows Max won't notice the discrepancy. But she might notice the detail. Because Jonathan can't see anything else now. He can't shake the image. The weight of such a tiny gesture. The meaning behind it.

But it's a few weeks before he gets to put the rest of the puzzle together.

It's yet another one of Max's rolls of film that does it. One that starts off just like all the others, with photos of Max and the rest of the party hanging out together. At Steve's this time, Jon notices. He's gotten good at recognising the background details now. It's mostly photos of the the girls at first, Max and El trying out new hairstyles, their hair twisted into dozens of tiny little braids dotted all around their heads and tied with bright elastics, and then all shaken out until it's big and bushy and standing out like two lions' manes. And then there's the makeover series, El with neon green eyeshadow and far too much lipstick, Max with ripped fishnets on her arms and eyeliner like a panda. Jon laughs when he sees the next pictures, a couple of awkwardly posed shots of the boys experimenting too, Lucas with bright pink lips and a huge grin, contrasting well with Mike's bright blue eyeshadow and sullen pout, both with Dustin and Will in the background, their hair tied up in tiny bunches, cheeks red from laughing.

Jonathan's still chuckling to himself when he moves onto the next pictures. The ones that were obviously taken much later that night, when the kids had left and, he assumes, Max had forgotten her camera.

They're of Steve and Billy. Just the two of them this time and both clearly drunk, Billy topless and grinning with two beer cans in his hands and a cigarette in his mouth, sitting in a way that gives him a little roll of flesh on his stomach, a detail that makes him appear so much softer, more real than Jonathan has ever seen him. And then there's Steve with his face far too close to the camera lens, blurry and out of focus and with his hair in disarray and an artful pout on his lips. A few more; Billy with his tongue sticking out, raising a middle finger, Steve balancing a beer can on his head and then Steve staring down at a spreading wet patch on the floor, his T-shirt soaked and stained.

They're typical teen photos. Nothing out of the ordinary. Boys messing around. Desperately clinging to the kinds of freedom and recklessness that they're now old enough to know will soon be overtaken by nine to fives and worrying over bills and thoughts of marriage and kids and futures. But Jonathan takes in how big their grins are, how the photos are just as joyous and as full of fun as the ones Max takes of the Party. How happy they both look.

Jon moves on to the next one.

Steve and Billy again. It's not exactly framed well, seemingly taken by Billy holding the camera at arm's length and guessing where he needs to aim. It's tilted at a bit of an angle, catching more of Steve than of Billy; and it's a little blurry, because they're both too close to the lens.

But there's no mistaking it now. It captures everything it needs to.

Because they're very clearly kissing.

It's chaste, just a simple press of closed mouths, but Jonathan feels moved by the tenderness emanating from the image. Steve's hand is gently cupping Billy's chin, his fingertips brushing against Billy's cheeks which glow with a pink flush. They both radiate contentment, smiling into each other in a way that hints at the true depth of the

love between them. It's obviously no drunken show, no silly dare watched by a braying audience. This is a kiss between lovers. It's true and real and good and sweet and Jonathan finds himself smiling at the sight of it.

Jonathan glances over at the next picture. This time it's Steve taking it, holding the camera out as Billy dozes with his head resting on Steve's shoulder and his face smushed into Steve's neck. Steve's other arm is wrapped around him, holding him close, and there's such a fond, warm smile on Steve's face that it feels even more intimate than the kiss.

Jonathan almost feels wrong for looking. For intruding.

He moves quickly onto the next image. The last one. And this is of Max again, obviously having reclaimed her camera as it's her and Lucas at the arcade, Max with her fist raised in triumph as she beats yet another one of Dustin's' high scores. Jonathan feels almost disappointed as he checks that there are no more photos lurking, no more rolls of film to go, and then he collects up all the photos, slipping the few pictures of Billy and Steve away from the rest and sealing them, along with the negatives, in their own brown envelope which he hides in one of the locked cabinets.

And then he goes home. Mind whirling.

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He knows he did the right thing when he sees Steve waiting outside the studio the next morning. He's trying to look nonchalant as he leans against the window, but Jonathan can tell by the mess of his hair that he's been tugging on it, and he notes the waver in Steve's voice when he asks if Max dropped any film off recently.

"Uh, yeah," Jonathan fumbles for the keys, letting them both in even though it's technically still half an hour before opening, "Yeah she came by yesterday, why?"

Steve's eyes widen at that, his hand going right back to his hair before he shoves it forcefully into his pocket, "Well, uh, she...there's some ones on there she doesn't want you to see. Private ones. Girl stuff, yeah? Her and El. So... I need to get it back? For them?"

He's holding out his hand, and Jonathan can see how his fingers tremble. He doesn't draw it out.

"I already printed them all, Steve. Last night. Let me-"

Jonathan turns to the door of the backroom, already reaching out to open the cabinet, but there's a firm hand digging into his shoulder and suddenly Steve's pushing him into the little room, shoving his back hard against the wall and jabbing a finger into his chest, "I don't know what you think you've seen, but listen, Byers, if you dare-" Steve's attempting to force some threat into his tone, to draw on the old King Steve persona, but his eyes give away just how scared he is. So Jonathan holds up both hands, keeping his voice soft as he gently pushes Steve's finger away, "I know what I saw, Steve and it's. It's OK. Really."

"Here." He reaches for the packet, handing it to Steve and then stepping away as he opens it and takes the photos out, "No one else has seen them, I promise. And I won't say a word."

Jonathan watches Steve's face as the words land, seeing it shift from fear to confusion as he glances from the photos back at Jonathan, "There are some sweet ones there. Really nice. You two look...you look so happy together."

Steve takes a deep breath, hands still shaking as he fumbles to get the photos back into the packet. Jonathan reaches out slowly to take them from him and slide them in, careful not to leave fingerprints, before handing it back to Steve.

"We are." Steve nods, a smile flicking across his face. "Happy. But I don't. I didn't...You don't...?" His breath speeds up, and Jonathan reaches out to place a hand on his shoulder.

"Just let me know if you want any extra prints of those," Jon gestures to the packet in Steve's hands. "Or if...if you you guys want to take more? With your own camera? I can always print those too. Discreet service." He taps his nose with a wink, then cringes a little, hands fluttering up as he tries to explain, "I don't mean... I just meant normal pictures. Not that you're not- *shit*. But I...I just meant couple photos. Sweet ones. Not like, not like...*nudes*."

He whispers the last word, cringing again, but Steve's laughing,

shaking his head as he waits for Jonathan to stop spluttering, and then he looks him straight in the eyes, a huge smile still on his face, “Dude, we’ve got a Polaroid for that. But thanks, Byers. I’ll keep it in mind.”